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ABSTRACT

The author contends that school administration has been suffering from inbreeding -- the result of the selection by chief school administrators of only those people who could present proven track records for decisionmaking positions. In an effort to learn whether this narrow view of school superintendents regarding the sources of administrative talent was equally evident among the lay sector of public school governance, a survey questionnaire was distributed to school board chairmen in the 150 largest U.S. cities. Survey results seem to indicate that outstanding people who have demonstrated leadership ability in other walks of life may aspire to top level positions in public school administration and that community representatives who are responsible for the development of school policy appear to be more openminded concerning the sources of school system leadership than are professional administrators. (Author)

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The Search for Leadership Talent

Over the past several years, the rising discontent over the results of American public education has resulted in numerous efforts to reorganize and revitalize the organization and curricula of the public schools. In the vanguard of those seeking educational reform, the Ford Foundation made a substantial commitment to several universities which would attempt to improve the quality of graduate programs in educational administration.

The thinking behind this action was that any serious attempt to bring about meaningful change in education would be stymied without the spirited and wholehearted support of the administrators. Teachers are creatures of habit and tend to develop patterns of behavior which become routinized. When it becomes desirable to effect a change in the instructional program which requires new behavioral patterns, teachers may feel uncomfortable and insecure until all aspects of the new program have been found to be acceptable. Understandably, then, an effort to initiate change will generally encounter resistance unless there is unmistakable evidence of administrative cooperation and support.

The opinion persists in some quarters that changes in the schools would be accelerated if more effective means were employed to hasten the process of selecting more creative and capable school administrators. Traditional promotion practices tend to reward conformity rather than imagination. In addition, the preponderant source of school administrators has been the university-based graduate schools of education where programs have undergone little substantive change in decades.

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The Ford Foundation objective was to replace narrow department curricula with university-wide programs having a heavy emphasis on the social and behavioral sciences. Thus, the new focus was on a more broadly educated individual, skilled in interpersonal relations and group dynamics, change processes, leadership behavior, urban problems, and politics. Another aim was to identify and recruit, from outside as well as within the formal educational community, men and women who would not normally aspire to careers as school system administrators. More minority group members would be attracted by omitting such traditional screening devices as standardized tests which normally would eliminate these applicants.

Of the nine institutions which struggled for two to three years to develop programs which could achieve the stated objectives, seven succeeded in producing approved programs, wholly or partly financed during the initial stages by the Ford Foundation. The programs of Atlanta and Columbia Universities, Claremont Graduate School, and the Universities of Chicago, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania are on the doctoral level, while that of Ohio State University is on the master's level.

A much more ambitious attempt to short circuit the normal path to school system administration was initiated a few years ago at Ohio State University under the leadership of the dean of the College of Education, Luvern Cunningham, who, with two of his professors, Richard Snyder and Raphael Nystrand, drafted a proposal to recruit and train one hundred men and women carefully selected from outside the field of education for eventual placement as school administrators in large urban systems.

In order to attract outstanding people with demonstrated leadership abilities, stipends of up to a maximum of $18,750 per year would be offered, plus travel support. Secondly, the programs would be highly individualized, depending upon the interests and backgrounds of the participants. Thirdly, five other institutions committed their resources and facilities to form a national network of training centers, each with a faculty coordinator. These included, in addition to Ohio State University, the City University of New York, Claremont Graduate School, Northwestern University, University of Texas, and the North Carolina State Department of Education.

During the first two years, the United States Office of Education made grants totaling more than $1,300,000 to this National Program for Educational Leadership which, by the end of the second year, had about thirty-five fellows engaged in a variety of activities in scattered localities across the nation.

The major emphasis of the program falls into three areas--recruitment, training, and placement--with particular importance on the latter, since the program does not necessarily lead to a degree and there was a question as to the reception that would be accorded the trainees without the traditional credentials. In this regard, there has been some indication of cooperation from at least two states that would indicate a breakthrough in the matter of customary certification requirements. California and Texas have already demonstrated a willingness to permit the employment of NPEL graduates, and other states have indicated a similar interest.[1]

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[1]Beverly Gifford, "A New Path to Educational Leadership." American Education, 7:9-12, December, 1971.

Unfortunately, school administration has been suffering from inbreeding--the result of the common practice of chief school administrators to select for decision-making positions only those people who could present proven track records. Thus, individuals who are desirous of advancement through normal channels are careful to demonstrate approved behavioral patterns.

In an effort to learn whether this narrow view of school superintendents regarding the sources of administrative talent was equally evident among the lay sector of public school governance, this writer collaborated with Stephen Lundin of Educational Management Services to survey sentiment among school board chairmen in the 150 largest cities in the United States. The results, as shown below, are quite at variance with views expressed by superintendents and generally translated into practice. The questions put to the chairmen and the tabulated answers given by the sixty-four who responded are as follows:

1. Would you as a school board member be willing to employ a person who has not had administrative experience in education, but has demonstrated leadership ability in other fields for the position of school superintendent?

   Yes: 23 No: 38 Cannot say: 3 N = 64

2. Would you employ such a person for the position of assistant superintendent?

   Yes: 32 No: 25 Cannot say: 7 N = 64

3. For any other central office position?

   Yes: 56 No: 3 Cannot say: 3 N = 62

4. Do the answers given represent the general census of your school board?

   Yes: 26 No: 2 Cannot say: 34 N = 62

The results indicate that outstanding people who have demonstrated leadership ability in other walks of life, may yet aspire to top level positions in public school administration. And even though all the chairmen may not truly reflect the majority opinion of their boards, the conclusion is inescapable that the community representatives, who are responsible for the development of school policy, appear to be more open-minded concerning the sources of school system leadership than are the professional administrators.

It may be startling to most chief school administrators to discover that perhaps half the school board members are quite willing to employ capable applicants for upper echelon positions in school system administration even if these people do not have the usual school experience. Although it should not be very difficult for the universities to adapt their programs to prepare such aspirants for public school positions, the chief obstacle is still the personnel officer who would continue to look for the same experiential background that he himself has.

Hope for the future lies in convincing those who bear responsibility for operating the public schools that they must seek out new leadership talent wherever it may be found, whether within the educational organization or without. The universities and the schools must form a partnership in developing more effective procedures for the selection and preparation of educational administrators--not only in the acceleration of the upward movement of imaginative and skilled young people--but also by opening a lateral entry for the attraction of outsiders who have the ability, dedication, and high purpose that will enrich the educational establishment.